

Cultural Sensitivity and Tribal Authority in Research Projects and Museum Collection Management

American Indian tribal influence or control over the management and care of their cultural heritage has greatly expanded in the past several years. The advent of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and other legislation has dramatically increased tribal consultations and research into traditional tribal associations and affiliations with park units. As a result, how research is undertaken and how museum collections are managed have changed. For example, the design and conduct of National Park Service ethnographic research projects have evolved in recent years to respond to the increasing awareness of the need for tribal control over sensitive cultural information.

At the same time, increased amounts of sensitive cultural information have entered the public sphere. Because confidentiality of sensitive information documented by the federal government cannot be guaranteed, tribes and the National Park Service have become critically aware that any information tribes consider too sensitive for public access should either not be documented in the first place or the documents should not be kept under agency control. These considerations have greatly increased the degree of tribal involvement in the conduct of ethnographic research as well as tribal control over what gets documented and the disposition of the final products, including tapes, transcripts, and reports.

In a recent example, the National Park Service and several tribes successfully collaborated to document Cheyenne and Arapaho oral histories of the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre in southeastern Colorado and protect sensitive information. Beginning in 1998, in response to the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site Study Act, an oral history project was designed to assist National Park Service efforts to precisely locate the site of the Sand Creek Massacre. The act

directed the bureau to identify the location and extent of the massacre site, and to determine the feasibility of designating it as a unit of the national park system. In preparation of the passage of the act, the U.S. Congress directed the National Park Service to collect tribal oral histories as a primary line of evidence to be used in locating the massacre site.

During several preliminary consultations with Cheyenne and Arapaho tribal representatives about the oral history project, the immediate concern was with the confidentiality of sensitive information. They were particularly concerned about the potential for National Park Service appropriation and publication of tribal intellectual property. Before the project began, tribal and National Park Service representatives drafted a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) regarding government-to-government relations in the implementation of the act including, among other provisions, language on the collection of oral histories. The MOU specified that the National Park Service and tribes jointly develop methods and protocols for the collection of oral histories and that the tribes may impose appropriate confidentiality restrictions to protect sacred or culturally-sensitive matters. Subsequent to the development of the MOU, some tribes also entered into cooperative agreements with the National Park Service, allowing funding directly to each tribe that wished to conduct its own oral history project. Through these flexible arrangements, each tribe was able to oversee the collection of oral histories from tribal members by the most culturally appropriate means.

For one tribe, protection of sensitive information was assured by the tribe setting up its own internal oral history project team and interviewing tribal members themselves and then having NPS staff participate in translation and transcription of the tapes. The tribe obtained copyright to the tapes and transcripts before turning

copies of the tapes and transcripts over to the National Park Service for reproduction in the final report and eventual curation in bureau and state historical society archives. Other tribes invited National Park Service staff to accompany tribal members in the recording of the oral histories, translated and transcribed the tapes jointly with bureau project team members, and asked the interviewees to review the transcribed stories for accuracy. Copies of the tapes were then provided to the National Park Service for reproduction in the final report and curation in bureau and state archives.

In cases in which interviewees made corrections to transcribed versions of the stories, notations were made on the transcripts that editorial changes have been made from the original tapes to the transcribed versions. In this way, future researchers listening to the curated tapes and comparing them with transcribed versions would be aware of discrepancies between the recorded and the written versions of the stories. At the same time, interviewees were assured that the most accurate versions of their stories were reproduced for the final and public report. Original tapes and transcripts stayed with each tribe for curation in tribal archives, and copies of tapes were provided to each interviewee as well. When considered appropriate, tribes developed their own interviewee consent forms and reimbursed individual interviewees in the manner appropriate to each tribe.

Through this collaborative process, the National Park Service was able to include oral historical information as a primary line of evidence in locating the massacre site, as the U.S. Congress directed, and the tribes retained control over the collection and dissemination of sensitive cultural information. In the process, the National Park Service, the Oklahoma and Colorado state historical societies, and three tribes all gained usable oral history archives for which confidentiality concerns were met in advance. The project included archival processing, preparation of finding aids, and cataloging of the tapes, transcripts, documents, and other products of the project.

Archeological and many other museum collections have been viewed primarily as specimens to be analyzed, photographed, or to serve as documents of projects and have been basically preserved for on-going research. As such, collections are typically organized in storage facilities according to western museum standards and methodol-

ogy. Like materials are stored together. Some objects are stored in plastic bags or in boxes, while some are cavity-packed in polyethylene foam or wrapped in tissue. NAGPRA legislation was passed, at least in part, to change past practices concerning the treatment and care of certain objects in museum collections, ancestral remains, and ancestral sites of American Indians. In response, National Park Service guidance has evolved to address the way American Indian material culture is acquired, cared for, and exhibited.

National Park Service guidance addresses the treatment of human remains, associated funerary objects, sacred objects, objects of cultural patrimony, and unassociated funerary objects in museum collections. Tribal representatives have been invited to visit many collections' storage areas and are informing us of different ways "collections" should be viewed. For instance, human remains and associated funerary objects should be accorded the highest level of respect possible. Remains and their funerary objects should be housed together, irrespective of the combination of material types. All non-organic storage materials have been removed from the boxes housing human remains. Human remains are kept separate from the "general" use collection. Also, tribes have requested that they be contacted prior to approving research access.

Based on information obtained during consultations, draft guidelines were prepared in 1998 for the NPS Intermountain Region, "Native American Human Remains And Associated Funerary Objects Stewardship." This draft guideline addresses principles, storage, consultation, management, transport, and repatriation. These guidelines describe specific approaches to particular issues. However, requests of tribal representatives should provide the primary source for care and handling of human remains and associated funerary objects while in museum care.

In addition, many of the objects in collections are not seen as specimens, but recognized for their on-going role in traditional practices within the tribe. The items that fit the definitions in NAGPRA can be repatriated to the appropriate culturally-affiliated tribe(s). However, many culturally-important objects are considered outside the scope of NAGPRA and will not be repatriated. These objects should be afforded culturally-sensitive consideration in storage preservation and their use.

Tribes can and have advised on issues of cultural sensitivity in caring for specific items such as who can handle specific items, the placement of items in relation to one another, conservation issues, use of specific items in exhibits, identification of objects, and the use of objects in religious activities. Through consultation with tribes, collections can be seen as much more than specimens. The objects can be recognized and respect can be afforded for the role they continue to serve in the tribal communities.

The issues surrounding the care and acquisition of Native American funerary objects, objects of cultural patrimony, sacred objects, and ancestral remains are obviously sensitive and complex. The perspectives of Native American and other indigenous peoples are clearly being incorporated into museum management throughout the world.¹ Institutions and federal agencies are continuing to “rethink” many of the traditional functions of museum management—collections, preservation, exhibitions, and education.

As noted above, many important decisions related to the care and acquisition of American Indian material culture are no longer simply the purview of the archeologist, collection manager, or curator. It is through consultation with appropriate tribal representatives that we can be assured of culturally-appropriate treatment and care. The dialogue resulting from NAGPRA-mandated consultation provides the descendants with a voice, a legislated voice, in the treatment of their cultural heritage. Nevertheless, some still see consultation as adding little more than additional unnecessary complexity and further eroding our ability to do “our work,” given the limited available resources.

Efforts are clearly needed to not only further dialogue and consultation, but also to institutionalize collaborative, respectful processes. The Division of Curation in the former NPS Intermountain Cultural Resource Center organized the workshop, Integrating Field Archeology, Conservation, and Culturally Appropriate Treatments.² The workshop had two primary purposes. One was to provide training on fundamental field conservation philosophies, techniques, and materials for archeologically-recovered material culture. The second purpose was to provide a forum for discussing various aspects of culturally-appropriate treatments as they pertain to certain material types, artifacts,

and site features. The workshop was unique in that concepts of culturally-appropriate treatment were linked with those of field archeology, field conservation, and museum management. The perspectives shared by participants from the Crow, Navajo, Lakota, San Ildefonso, Santa Clara, Zuni, and Jemez tribes were particularly relevant.

During the workshop, representatives from Jemez and Zuni discussed concerns that their respective Pueblos have covering the care and handling of objects of their cultural heritage. The concern was not only for the physical and spiritual well being of the objects, but also for the people handling them and their communities as a whole. The care and handling concerns are relevant to all phases, i.e., planning, field, laboratory, report writing, and repository phases of an archeological project. By consulting from the beginning of a research project involving American Indian cultural heritage, culturally-appropriate materials and handling techniques, accommodating both preservation and culturally-appropriate perspectives, are more likely to be used, thereby avoiding future conflicts.

During the workshop, Jemez representatives provided a set of protocols to be followed when curating certain Jemez material culture items. Some of the protocols include:

- **Animal and anthropomorphic objects and attire.** When in curation, place all such objects and attire in a position so they “face the Pueblo of Jemez” or would if they were to rise up to a standing position. If possible, place in a drawer or contained area, allow circulation of fresh air every so often.
- **Round stone pebbles and rocks.** All stone objects that resemble “balls or marbles” are to be completely isolated from other Jemez cultural objects, and placed away from any objects affiliated with any other cultural entity. Curation should be in a secure container that ensures that they are in the dark. It is strongly recommended that they not be handled or examined and avoid any close contact.
- **Pottery bowls with “stepped rims” and/or pigment stains in bottom interior.** Open-air storage is recommended as is placement among other objects of Jemez cultural affiliation. If possible, place near the southeast corner of the storage area.
- **Feather bundles.** When in curation, place each bundle in “its own” open box or container (no

lid) on pure unbleached cotton, then keep bundles separated but close-by. Avoid close contact, examination, or handling.

By sharing such information, as appropriate, tribes will help to ensure that their material culture receives proper care. By respectfully soliciting such information from appropriate tribal representatives, collection managers may ultimately achieve more balanced curatorial approaches without compromising either museum professional standards or tribal protocols.

Historically, museum collection preservation or conservation treatments commonly required the introduction of chemicals or pesticides. From a museum perspective, progress in these areas is being made in that current approaches consider the benefits of non-pesticide pest control treatments, such as freezing, heating, or using non-oxygen environments. However, when American Indian (and other) cultural objects are involved, it is prudent to consider the cultural appropriateness of such approaches and to consult before the actions are undertaken or are needed. Using methods and materials used such as freezing, heating, immersion in nitrogen or carbon dioxide, consolidation with modern acrylics, and the like may physically preserve the object. However, they may have serious unintended detrimental effects on the spiritual well being of objects and their suitability for future use. This is especially of concern for ceremonial and other sacred objects. These concepts were shared during the Field Conservation workshop and also formed important points of discussion during an Anoxic Enclosures workshop hosted by the Santa Fe Curation Division during 1997.

These two workshops are examples of successful efforts to help further institutionalize con-

sultation through staff training or at the grass roots level, rather than through legislative mandates. Other training methods, such as the Exhibit Conservation Guidelines compact disk produced by the Division of Conservation, Harpers Ferry Center, provide opportunities to include concepts of culturally-appropriate treatment.³ Museum exhibits can be a wonderful means of reaching large and diverse audiences. Exhibits typically include an array of objects illustrating historically important and poignant topics. As such, it clearly is critical to ensure that responsible exhibit planning and design takes place, as stressed in the Exhibit Conservation Guidelines publication. It is equally important to ensure that culturally-responsible exhibit planning and design takes place—perhaps this could be the focus of another essay.

Notes

- ¹ Marjorie L. Harth, "Learning from Museums with Indigenous Collections: Beyond Repatriation," *Curator*, 42:4 (1999): 274-284.
- ² Allen Bohnert, "A Workshop—Integrating Field Archeology, Conservation, and Culturally Appropriate Treatments," *CRM*, 22:7 (1999): 47-49.
- ³ Toby Rapahel, Nancy Davis, and Kevin Brooks, "Exhibit Conservation Guidelines," Division of Conservation, Harpers Ferry Center, National Park Service, 1999.

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Consultation with American Indian tribes has increased with the advent of legislation that addresses American Indian cultural heritage. Consultation has led to changes in the way that museum collections are researched, stored, and exhibited to respond to the increasing awareness of the need for tribal control over sensitive cultural information. Photo courtesy the National Park Service.

